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SUBJECT: Government to evict Plum Village monks again by the end of the year

REF: HCMC 672; HCMC 669 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Vietnamese officials in Hanoi and the Central Highlands continue to assert that Plum Village monks and nuns must return to their home provinces and seek residence at local Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS)-affiliated temples despite our latest round of protests. The head of the EU mission who recently visited Lam Dong said that Phuoc Hue's Chief abbott felt he had no choice but to sign a document agreeing to evict the followers in the face of pressure from police, local authorities and an angry mob. The Plum Village monks and nuns appear reconciled to returning to their home provinces. The MFA denied a request by HCMC to visit the area (which falls outside of the HCMC consular district). The Mission will continue to press for a peaceful resolution and protection for the Lang Mai Order, and remind the GVN its handling of the entire Bat Nha situation reflects poorly on Vietnam's deteriorating human rights record. The Embassy is also planning to visit the area in early January. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) In a December 12 meeting with the Vice Chairman of the Central Highlands Steering Committee, Tran Viet Hung, in Dak Lak Province, Poloff voiced continuing concerns about the situation facing the Plum Village adherents residing at the Phuoc Hue pagoda, noting in particular the problems the EU delegation recently experienced when trying to meet with Chief Abbott Thich Thai Tuan and Plum Village followers. Hung was well briefed on the matter and quoted almost verbatim MFA and MPS talking points that dismiss the situation as an "intra-Buddhist dispute." He also recalled his exchange with State Department officials on this topic during his visit in November as part of a VOLVIS program. He said that the only possible solution at this time was for the Plum Village monks to return to their home provinces and to seek residence in local VBS-affiliated pagodas.

¶3. (SBU) On December 14, Swedish Political Counselor Marie-Louise Thaning, who led the EU delegation to the region, said she was "shocked" by the angry mob that had interrupted the EU meeting with the Chief Abbott of the Phuoc Hue pagoda last week (Ref A). Thaning noted that the Bat Nha situation was a key topic of conversation during the EU's biannual Human Rights Dialogue that took place December 11, immediately after the EU visit to the region. Thaning said that the EU delegation highlighted the European Council's recent resolution which criticized Vietnam's actions regarding the Plum Village Order and asked the Vietnamese government to act with restraint in resolving the situation.

¶4. (SBU) On December 14, Poloff met with Director General for International Cooperation Dang Tai Tinh and Director General for Buddhist Affairs Bui Huu Duoc at the Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) to discuss the ongoing situation at the Bat Nha Pagoda. Not surprisingly, DG Duoc characterized the dispute as an "internal" disagreement between Buddhist factions. Poloff took issue with

this characterization noting the CRA had recently rejected the sponsorship requests by two VBS pagodas willing to host the Plum Village order in Dong Nai and Lam Dong provinces (Ref A). If this was simply an intra-Buddhist dispute, why did the CRA stand in the way when the Buddhists tried to resolve the issue peacefully, Poloff asked. DG Duoc changed tack, insisting that the Plum Village Community had broken the law by not seeking CRA permission before building their training center at the Bat Nha Pagoda, illegally installed their own Deputy Abbott of the pagoda, failed to register the monks and nuns with local officials as required by law, and ordained monks and nuns without seeking prior approval of the CRA. He said, "If we let the Plum Village Community break the law with impunity every other religion will follow suit." He also asserted that there were significant lifestyle differences between the Plum Village "religion" and the state-sponsored VBS, including allowing monks and nuns to pray and meditate together, which is considered "scandalous" by other Buddhists here.

¶5. (SBU) Poloff noted Plum Village followers had been active for at least four years, and that Thich Nhat Hanh had been welcomed by President Triet and many other senior officials. DG Duoc did not respond, instead complaining about "anti-GVN" information posted on the "Phu Sa" website, which he attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh. Suggesting that political considerations have colored the GVN's judgment, Duoc then cited a letter from Thich Nhat Hanh to Triet, supposedly in private but later posted online, that recommended that the CRA and the religious police be abolished and that Vietnam

HANOI 00001398 002 OF 002

drop the word "Socialist" from its name.

¶6. (SBU) Duoc then repeated earlier claims that the GVN had tried several times to meet with Thich Nhat Hanh in France, only to be rebuffed. He also wondered why none of the Plum Village Community's senior leadership had attempted to call the CRA to discuss the ongoing dispute. Poloff pushed back, asking if DG Duoc had called the Lam Dong local authorities when the mob originally attacked the Plum Village Community in June, whether he had called on the Ministry of Information and Communication when the MPS mouthpiece Cong An Nhan Dan published several slanderous articles against Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Community, or whether he had called the police to find out why plainclothes officers were involved in roughing up monks and evicting them from their homes. Not surprisingly, Duoc did not respond.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Barring further provocations by GVN authorities or a change of heart on the part of the Lang Mai followers, the nearly year-long standoff is coming to an end, with the Lang Mai monks resigned to leave the pagoda by the end of the year. Two other Plum Village contingents remain in Hue and Khanh Hoa provinces. The authorities' poor handling of the situation, particularly their unwillingness to protect the followers against mob violence, constitute another stain on Vietnam's already poor human rights record and remind us of the perceived "threats" that groups like the Long Mai represent to maintaining social order in Vietnam. End comment.

¶8. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Ho Chi Minh City. Michalak